Cherry Red

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by Beatricenius

Summary

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“Some of them likely do,” Hannibal said. “Femininity is a social practice. What is it that doesn’t belong to you?”

“You’re asking what I’m offering,” Will felt his skin prickle as Hannibal’s hands settled on his hips. “You tell me. What am I to you right now?”

Will and Hannibal switch things up. Hannibal lets more of his secrets slip and things get complicated.

Notes

This is one of those fics where no matter what I do, I'm unhappy with the end result. Huge thanks to vagaries-and-caprices for cheering me on and offering her beta reading skills. Any mistakes are my own.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

With the way Will's brain was wired, death was inevitably personal – no matter if the deceased was a complete stranger or someone he knew. These things considered, he found a measure of relief in viewing a body in the clinical environment of a forensic lab, where cold flesh and marble skin were stripped of emotional ties and context. Looking around the room, he saw no outrage, no horrified disbelief, only faces set in determined masks of focused attention.

"I just don't understand how he's choosing them," Beverly said. She and the rest of the team were caught up in an anxious brainstorm over the cooling body of the last paper doll kill and their joint frustration quivered beneath every spoken word. "Will, I thought you said it wasn't random?"

Will scrubbed his face with his hand. The corpse they stood huddled over like birds of prey had been identified, and the woman seemed to have no association whatsoever with the killer. Which turned his previous mentions of getting closer to catching the guy on end.

"It isn't random," Will said, a little more heat behind his words than he intended for there to be. "I just thought his connection to the woman before this one meant it was personal. But I don't know. Maybe that one wasn't part of the pattern. Maybe there's no pattern at all. He could be lashing out, making his next victim impossible to predict."

"So what are you going to do?" Beverly gave him a pressing look. For a fleeting second, it annoyed him immensely.

"He targets a wide variety of women," Will said, throwing his hands out. "Honestly, I don't know what to do."

He lowered his gaze and let it linger on the body until his vision blurred. Like the others, she had been found in her old room in her childhood home, arranged in her underwear like a paper doll. Like the one before her, womanhood had been turned against her like a weapon: beauty made obscene by exaggeration, femininity used as a means of humiliation. The clothes that surrounded this woman had been all pastel and frills, torn into shreds. It was all cheap theatrics, lacking in innovation to the extent that Will couldn't find a personality in there, nothing distinctive to hitch the killer's profile to.

Will's train of thought was interrupted as Jack swung open the door and beckoned for him to follow. Will reluctantly tore his gaze away from the corpse and made his way across the room, expecting to get chewed out, probed even further or taken to some other manner of crime scene. He steeled himself for whatever was coming, already dreading it.

Jack glanced around the corridor, checking whether they were alone. Then he crossed his arms over his chest and Will's sense of foreboding grew teeth.

"Is it true what I've been hearing?" Jack asked.

“What have you been hearing?”

“About you and Hannibal.”

Will never had to guess what was going through Jack’s head. Sometimes that was a relief, sometimes it was a nuisance. This time, it was the latter. He couldn’t decide whether to feign ignorance or not, and in the end, he opted to stay silent, head tipping back with a sigh. Jack shook his head.

“I already called Hannibal over here. He and I are going to talk about this. I’ll call you if there’s any development on the case, you’re done for today.”

It wasn’t as though Will had been looking forward to having that particular conversation with his boss, but a thread of resentment still wormed its way through whatever baffled relief he felt when Jack turned his back to him and walked away. Being dismissed wasn’t what grated most at him, but rather the idea that Jack had the nerve to call Hannibal all the way over to talk about something that concerned him just as well.

Too aggravated to leave – especially without checking in with Hannibal – Will lingered in the corridor near Jack’s office, listening to the muffled voices mingling behind the door. When he heard the words *irresponsible* and *taking advantage* in Jack’s overbearing speech on workplace ethics, he regretted staying within earshot and walked away.

Hannibal found him later in the cafeteria, glaring into a cooling cup of coffee. Will heard rather than saw him, being well acquainted with the sound of Hannibal – the way his shoes clacked loud against the floor in his confident stride, steps even and unhesitant as he approached.

“Back from the lion’s den?” Will nudged the chair opposite to him with his foot. Hannibal pulled it out and sat down.

“Jack wants us to sign a form. An affirmation of consensual romance in the workplace,” Hannibal paused and Will looked up to find his even features set in a flinty expression. “He wants me to write you a referral as well. I told him I fail to see the purpose of that as you are not my patient in any official capacity, but he was quite persistent.”

Will exhaled through his nose, letting his shoulders drop. “I would sign a form. I guess. I don’t really care,” he searched Hannibal’s eyes. “Why do you?”

Hannibal frowned and Will caught on fairly quickly. “It’s offensive to you. The lack of professionalism you would admit to engaging in.”

“What we have would only be a workplace romance if we shared the same workplace,” Hannibal said. “We hardly do. And there is nothing in my terms of employment suggesting that you are my patient. Officially.”

“Unofficially then?” Will chewed on the inside of his cheek. “I mean—I’m not saying you’ve done anything wrong. Obviously. But I do understand what Jack is getting at.”

Hannibal's expression softened. He reached out and put his hand over Will's, squeezing gently.

"I know you do. Forgive me. Your opinion on the matter has been entirely overlooked. Do you want to discuss it?"

Will felt a burst of warmth in his chest. He turned his hand to weave their fingers together, holding Hannibal's hand firmly in his.

"I feel like a kid all over again. I can't believe he called you all the way out here when he could've talked to me. This kind of removal of agency, it's—" he drew a deep breath. "It's actually worse than being a kid. I'm not being held responsible for my actions at all."

"You may recall my initial assessment of how Jack sees you."

A teacup flashed before Will's eyes, dainty and fragile. He scoffed and shook his head. "I don't know how he found out about us. I sure as hell didn't tell him. I don't know what there is to tell."

Hannibal cocked his head, giving him an assessing look. Will had to assume something in his tone had given him away.

"I told you once that labels were of little importance to me. Was I wrong to assume you felt the same way?"

Will shrugged. "I can see what we've been. Where we're headed. It's enough."

"Where are we headed?"

"You don't want to know what we've been?"

"I know what we've been. Strangers. Sharing secrets."

Will shook his head. "I was doing the sharing. Not you."

"You volunteered information under the pretense of therapeutic treatment. But you see me, whether I offer myself up for inspection or not. I believe that to be mutual."

Will tipped his face down and smiled, feeling the warmth in his chest spread. "That's where we're headed. Wherever that mutual recognition gets us."

"I long to see where it takes us," Hannibal smiled back. "Though the journey is said to be half the fun."

Will felt his own smile growing wide and dopey. He stood, ignoring his untouched mug of coffee. "I'm free for the rest of the day. You?"

"The same."

"Can we go back to your place?"

Hannibal nodded and rose, extending the hand that had arched protectively over Will's mere moments ago. Will paused for a second, but there was no reason for him to hesitate. Not now, in any case. If Jack knew, others probably did too. He took Hannibal's hand and walked out of the building with a faint smile, steps growing lighter as he left Jack and the team and dead women on steel slabs behind.

*

Will made his way into Hannibal's bedroom and changed out of his work clothes while Hannibal answered a phone call. He didn't have a drawer at Hannibal's place yet, though he kept an overnight bag there that felt increasingly impractical. Hannibal hadn't offered to clear a drawer for him and Will didn't know how to ask. He wasn't even sure whether that was a thing people really did. He'd never had a relationship that progressed far enough to warrant such concerns.

Not finding the sweater he was looking for in his bag, Will opened Hannibal's walk-in closet to see if he or Hannibal had somehow misplaced it. The closet was the size of a small bedroom in its own right, filled with suits and men's shoes. He assumed Hannibal kept his feminine clothing somewhere around there, but looking around, he couldn't see any. He did, however, notice Hannibal's vanity, almost hidden away in a corner of the room.

Will had never studied the piece of furniture up close before, but now he couldn't help but run a hand over the cool wood, thinking of how much time Hannibal had likely spent there. It bothered him that he couldn't keep it in plain sight, though he understood why putting it out in the open might be a bad idea.

Just as he was picking up a small tube, presumably containing lipstick, he heard those familiar footfalls behind him. Hannibal looked over his shoulder, standing so close that Will felt his warm breath against the side of his face.

"See something you like?"

"Most of your makeup is similar," Will observed. "Lipsticks in red or pink, eyeshadows in earthy tones."

"I'm inspired by my mother. She was a classic beauty," Hannibal looked at the lipstick in Will's hand. "That is a matte red, darker than the shade I normally like to wear. You have a paler complexion than me. On you, it would create beautiful contrasts."

"On me?" Will huffed a short laugh. "No, I don't think you'd want to see that."

"Why not?"

Will grimaced. Hannibal cocked his head, eyes gaining an intrigued glimmer. "Do you honestly think you would be off-putting? You couldn't possibly be."

"I don't think we should find out."

Hannibal eyed the lipstick, still in Will's hand. "Well, if you have any inclination at all, I would be happy to help you put it on. The result is likely to be far superior if someone experienced assists you."

Will narrowed his eyes, a part of him seriously considering it and every part of him reluctant to admit it. "I've got a beard," he stalled.

"You needn't shave to try it on. If you would prefer to, I would lend you a razor, of course."

Will looked down, noticing he still held the lipstick in his hand. The cold metal was slowly being warmed by his palm, making it seem almost alive. He realized he had already decided.

"Ok," he said. "I'm shaving first though."

Hannibal led him to the bathroom and showed him where he kept his razor, shaving cream and aftershave. Will felt an odd sort of anticipation needle at his insides. He hadn't shaved completely in so long he couldn't quite remember how he looked without his stubble. When he was done, he found little familiarity in the clean-shaven man staring back at him in the mirror, wide-eyed and oddly boyish.

He shook his head and walked back to the closet in Hannibal's bedroom. Being alone gave him too much time to reflect on the situation.

Entering the walk-in closet, Will found Hannibal sitting on a stool next to the vanity. "Please sit facing me," he said to Will as he approached.

Will did as he was told. Hannibal cradled his face in his hand, smiling. "You look different."

"I look too young. No one could take me seriously like this."

"That is a vast exaggeration. You are simply unused to seeing your face without a beard," Hannibal unscrewed the lid to a small container without a label. "I will begin with exfoliating your lips, using a scrub. It's mainly sugar and almond oil. It will remove dead skin and present us with a smooth surface to work off of."

Hannibal applied a grainy mixture to Will's mouth with his fingers, using firm pressure and even, circular motions. After a few moments, he wiped it off with a soft terry cloth and picked out a small tube from the collection of little cylindrical containers on the vanity.

"This is a lip balm," Hannibal started applying something creamy and scentless to Will's lips and Will resisted the urge to flinch from it. "It should sit on your lips for a moment to properly moisturize them."

"You haven't even done anything yet and I feel ridiculous," Will admitted after some time. Hannibal merely pulled out a tissue and started patting Will's mouth, wiping away the oily residue from the lip balm.

"Try not to think so much," he advised, picking out yet another tube from the vanity. "If done regularly, it becomes a mindless task. Focus on sensation."

Will tried and failed as he realized Hannibal was holding the red lipstick he'd been fiddling with before. His stomach gave an unexpected lurch and he closed his eyes as it opened with a dull click. It seemed senseless and reasonable at the same time to feel uncomfortable, the situation poking at a set of prejudices he hadn't put out in the open to examine very closely.

"Some people use a lip liner. That is a pen in the same color of the lipstick, used to draw the contours of the mouth before filling the rest in with lipstick. I prefer to put it on without that particular aid. There is greater satisfaction in applying lipstick directly to one's mouth, I find."

Hannibal cupped Will's jaw in his hand and tilted his head up. Will couldn't quite bear opening his eyes and resisted another flinch as he felt the lipstick being applied to his mouth. Hannibal worked slowly yet efficiently, tilting his head when he needed to, instructing him to part his lips and close them again. Finally, he let him go and smoothed a thumb over his cheek.

"There. If you would open your mouth one last time."

Will parted his lips hesitantly. Then his eyes flew open as he felt the tip of Hannibal's finger slide between his lips.

"Suck."

Automatically, he did. Hannibal slid back out, smiling a little as he presented the streaks of red around his finger. "To get rid of lipstick on the inside of your mouth. Now smile."

Will smiled more out of disbelief than amusement. Hannibal mirrored the flash of teeth, eyes warm and glowing in the light by the vanity. "No stains on your teeth either. You may have a look at yourself in the mirror."

Will turned and stilled at the image of himself. Hannibal hadn't drawn outside of his lips, but his mouth still appeared fuller, the dent in his upper lip more pronounced and the quirked corners of his mouth emerging more clearly. The impression was decidedly sensual. Overall, his reflection was foreign enough that there was a brief second where he couldn't quite recognize himself, his brain scrambling to merge the cherry red mouth and the smooth pallid skin with the worn face Will was used to seeing in the mirror.

"It suits you very well," Hannibal said.

Will felt a blush spread up his neck. "I don't know why I agreed to this."

"Does it matter?" Hannibal smiled, a little mischievous now. "Though I'm afraid your clothes aren't doing you any favors. I bet the impact would be even more striking without them on."

"Subtle."

"A mere suggestion."

Will rolled his eyes with a small smile and stood, taking Hannibal's hand to head back into the bedroom. There, he unbuttoned his flannel and toed off his shoes. Hannibal steered his

hands away before he got any further, deft fingers working his belt and zipper open, eyes never straying from Will's face. The intensity of his gaze made Will look away, not exactly uncomfortable, but acutely self-conscious.

"I'm sure you will deny it, but you look lovely," Hannibal said, making it worse. Will felt his face warm even further, mouth caught between a grimace and a smile.

"I'm hairy and gross."

"A vision," Hannibal insisted. Will stepped out of his pants and underwear and found himself pressed against the solid frame of Hannibal's body. His suit felt scratchy against his bare skin and his state of undress seemed all the more obvious for it. "You remind me of erotic French postcards. Dark-haired women unashamed in their natural beauty."

Will snorted into the lapel of his suit. "I know you're older than me, but not by that much. Are you seriously going to tell me you ogled vintage photos of French ladies rather than normal porn when you were a kid?"

"I did neither. But you might be surprised. Older boys would pass those cards between each other in the orphanage I grew up in."

"Orphanage?" Will startled, looking up to meet Hannibal's gaze. "Where?"

"Lithuania," Hannibal stroked a few strands of hair behind Will's ear. "My family passed away when I was very young. Before my uncle took me in, I was placed in an orphanage. I will tell you more about it sometime. Why will you not believe me when I compliment you? You must know that you are attractive."

Will felt distinctly uncomfortable now. "Even if I were attractive as a man, this isn't—"

"It isn't?"

Will shook his head. "Nothing. This is just strange for me. Like a reversal of what I'm used to."

"You aren't used to being the object of desire. The focus of erotic attention."

"Is that what I am?"

"Always," Hannibal didn't wink, but he might as well have. "Would you lie down on the bed for me?"

Will almost cringed at the idea of being laid out on full display, but decided to heed Hannibal's advice and get out of his head. His knees quivered a little and he had to remind himself not to take everything so seriously as he crawled on top of the bed, positioning himself on his back. He tried not to care about how he ended up, knowing it would only come off as awkward if he tried to arrange himself in a deliberately enticing pose. In the end, one of his hands curled next to his face while the other came to rest on his chest. His legs were parted, a little more than he would have liked, but he couldn't bring himself to rearrange them.

Hannibal traced his fingers along his side, over the swell of his thigh and down the valley where his hip hollowed out. Then he cupped his dick, giving the still soft flesh a light squeeze, almost as an afterthought.

“This is unusual for me too, in the sense that it isn’t the norm for us. Touching you like this feels almost illicit.”

“It really isn’t,” Will’s breath hitched as Hannibal cradled his balls in his hand, rolling them over his palm. “You can fuck me. If you want.”

Hannibal paused for a split second, but didn’t stop his ministrations. “Do you want me to?”

“Yeah, sure,” the idea had Will’s stomach fluttering with a combination of nerves and excitement. “How do you want me?”

Hannibal kept stroking his side, as if it were an effort to tear his hand away. “On your hands and knees, I think. To start.”

Will shuffled onto his knees, resting his head on his forearms and arching his back a little bit. He hoped he didn’t look as silly as he felt. He skated a glance over at Hannibal, who had begun taking his clothes off, carefully draping them over a chair until he was wearing nothing at all. It occurred to Will that Hannibal’s nudity had never appeared to him like his – masculine with its flat planes and cord-like muscle, lacking any trace of femininity.

“I feel like I’m offering you something that doesn’t belong to me,” Will said, feeling the bed dip as Hannibal kneeled behind him. “Like this is me and isn’t me at the same time. I wonder if women ever feel that way.”

“Some of them likely do,” Hannibal said. “Femininity is a social practice. What is it that doesn’t belong to you?”

“You’re asking what I’m offering,” Will felt his skin prickle as Hannibal’s hands settled on his hips. “You tell me. What am I to you right now?”

“Suspended in ambiguity. Caught somewhere between innocence and its polar opposite. Have you done this before?”

“What do you think?”

Hannibal’s fingernails dug into his hips. A hint of playfulness made its way into his voice when he leaned down and spoke into the top of his head. “I think you’re being cheeky. But we can go about this the hard way. Has anyone touched you here?”

His hands trailed down to stroke the inside of his thighs. Will scoffed softly. “Yes.”

Hannibal’s hands slid higher up, cupping his hardening cock. “Here?”

“Yes.”

“Naughty girl,” the words sent an unexpected surge of arousal coursing through him, almost stealing the breath from his lungs. Strong hands spread his legs wider apart and a thick digit rubbed gently over his hole. “And here?”

Will shook his head. “No. I’ve, uh, used my fingers on myself though.”

“But you’ve never let anyone penetrate you.”

“I would’ve, I think. I haven’t really dated a lot of guys.” Will honestly hadn’t dated any men at all, only been on the receiving end of a hand job once when he was black-out drunk in college, but he wasn’t about to go into specifics with Hannibal. “It never went very far anyway.”

“Intercourse is time-demanding. It requires a certain amount of trust, perhaps,” Hannibal applied a little firmer pressure and Will’s breath stuttered. “Yet you didn’t hesitate to offer me this kind of intimacy. You must trust me very much.”

Will didn’t answer immediately, but he knew the answer intuitively. “I do.”

“I shall have to be gentle then,” playfulness once again laced Hannibal’s voice. “As it is your first time.”

Hannibal bent down to kiss his lower back, slowly trailing his lips further down to get him used to the sensation. Still, when his tongue teased the edges of his hole, Will almost recoiled, and the first firm press of his tongue made him stiffen – trapping a groan in his throat. Hannibal’s hands soothed him, running along his flanks as his tongue kept laving hot and wet over the sensitive bundle of nerves. It felt like nothing Will had ever experienced before.

“You’re quiet,” Hannibal said. “Is this alright?”

Will realized he was holding his breath. It trembled when he released it. “Yeah, yeah, don’t stop. Please.”

As Hannibal’s mouth fastened on him again, Will thought about all those times he’d done this for Hannibal. The way his wet hole felt like warm silk beneath his tongue when he was stretched to the point of gaping, wrinkled skin smoothed out. The way Hannibal’s lipstick left red marks on the sheets when he was too far gone to care about staining. The breathless little moans he could wheedle from Hannibal’s half-open mouth with his tongue wedged deep inside him, charmingly close to whimpers.

Will squirmed as Hannibal’s tongue wiggled inside, as if his musings had been audible to him. Distantly, he could hear the clicking sound from a bottle, then slick fingers replaced Hannibal’s mouth. It only felt uncomfortable once two fingers spread him open.

“It will pass soon,” Hannibal said as Will made a small sound of complaint, gently moving his hand back and forth. His fingers found his prostate and Will startled, feeling a spark of pleasure that grew to outweigh the discomfort.

“You are doing so well,” Hannibal praised, pressing a small kiss to his lower back. “I think you like being a naughty girl for me. Do you?”

Will’s face felt warm. His whole body felt warm, as if his skin had thinned or his blood had rushed too close to the surface. “Yes,” he mumbled, not knowing what else to say.

“Good,” Will could hear the smile in his voice. Hannibal slowly withdrew his fingers and turned him over, laying Will on his back before positioning himself between the V of his legs. Hannibal aimed a smile down at him, smoothing down his hair with the hand that wasn’t covered in lube and spit.

“I honestly can’t tell whether you are acting or not.”

“I’m not acting. What part would be acting?”

“The innocence in your reactions. As if this is truly your first time being intimate with someone.”

“What was that you said the first time we did this? You’re not inexperienced, but the circumstances are novel to you. That could apply to me too.”

What felt like at least three fingers slipped inside him and Will’s sentence was punctuated by an involuntary gasp. Hannibal scattered kisses over his skin, lips dragging over his neck and chest. Will let his moan rise to a keen as Hannibal sucked a kiss into his throat, teeth closing around the fast-paced beat of his pulse. For a frantic moment, he thought Hannibal was going to break skin, and the fact that the thought made his cock throb with arousal was more disconcerting than the idea itself.

“Your pulse is quickening,” Hannibal nuzzled his throat, a sliver of concern in his voice. “Are you sure you wish to do this?”

“Yes,” Will clung to Hannibal’s neck with both arms, trying to steady his breath. “I’m just a little nervous. That’s ok.”

“Alright then,” Hannibal placed a kiss under his jaw and fished the lube from where it had been discarded, reaching down to coat himself with it. Will drew a sharp breath as Hannibal pulled him closer, spreading his legs wide and placing the tip against his hole.

“No need to be nervous,” Hannibal murmured in his ear. “I will take such good care of you, my darling.”

The term of endearment was new, but Will had no time to reflect on it, concentrating exclusively on trying to relax as Hannibal started sinking inside him. That was exactly the word he would use to describe the sensation – a slow, inevitable plunge, his body accepting more than he was consciously offering to give.

“God, you’re big,” Will aimed for virginal bashfulness to suit their game, but the remark only ended up coming off as pornographic. He closed his eyes against the rush of embarrassment. “That’s terrible, sorry. I mean it though, I’m not sure—” he drew a shuddering breath as

Hannibal slid deeper, feeling like the pressure might split him in half. “Tell me this isn’t the first time you’re doing this, I’m honestly not sure it’ll fit.”

Hannibal chuckled into his shoulder. It seemed an unusual sound for him, stuttered and raspy. “It will fit,” he said, stilling as he finally seemed to bottom out. “I’m sure.”

Hannibal bent one of his legs further back, gripping his thighs for purchase as he started rocking his hips.

“Oh, fuck,” Will screwed his eyes shut, nails carving into the meat of Hannibal’s back. Even though he was taking things slow, certainly much slower than Will would have, the sensation of being stretched on the thick length of his cock bordered on painful. Will might have told him so if there wasn’t a part of him that liked it; the unfolding ache, the lack of inhibition Hannibal indulged in. The pace of his thrusts gradually quickened and Will couldn’t help a soft whine, feeling like Hannibal occupied all empty spaces in him at once.

“Am I hurting you?” Will didn’t answer and Hannibal kissed his ear. “Tell me to go slower.”

Will shook his head. “Faster. Harder, please.”

Something teased at the edge of his consciousness when Hannibal altered the position to gain a better leverage. A sense that there was something truly substantial he was missing. He couldn’t put his finger on it at first, too distracted by the pain and the pleasure and the strain in his thigh as Hannibal practically bent him in half, but then a rough hand grasped his ankle with a force that seemed excessive, and he realized that he was being treated like dead weight. Unresponsive flesh that needed to be maneuvered and arranged, lacking the ability to assist.

Ice water fear washed over him as he saw himself from the outside, like in a dream, willed into action with a plastic, red-lipped smile forced onto his face. There and gone in a second, the flickering image left him feeling ashamed at the way his mind was stuck in the marshes of old crime scenes, wires crossing in his brain when the only thing Hannibal was doing was fucking him exactly how he wanted him to.

“Will,” Hannibal squeezed around his ankle. His hands – artist’s hands, surgeon’s hands – weren’t even rough. “I want you here with me.”

Will struggled against the strain in his thigh to lean in for a kiss, slipping his tongue inside the comforting warmth of Hannibal's mouth. It tasted like nothing in particular, like the inside of his own mouth, as if their individual differences were dissolving; taste and smell and body parts coming together to form a singularity. Will untangled their limbs and pushed Hannibal on his back, straddling his hips.

“I’m here,” he assured Hannibal. “Not going anywhere.”

Approval crinkled the laugh lines around Hannibal’s eyes as Will started sinking back down on his cock, quickly setting a pace that had his eyes rolling back in his head, jaw slack and brows knitting. Hannibal cupped Will’s chest as if there was something for his hands to hold, scraping a nail over his nipple, and Will felt it like an electric shock, jolting him out of the

rhythm his hips had set. Satisfied with his response, Hannibal rolled the hardened nub between his fingers. When he gave it a slight tug, Will jerked and moaned and leaned helplessly into it, feeling his cock flex where it bobbed between his legs.

“Wicked thing,” Hannibal said, voice throaty and low. “Could you come from this? Just being filled and played with.”

Will blushed furiously and shook his head, digging his fingernails into Hannibal’s chest.

“Tell me what you need then,” Hannibal traced the knotted skin around the tender peak of his nipple with his finger. The feathery touch rendered Will’s mind blessedly empty and his climax seemed close and out of reach at the same time. He didn’t quite trust his voice, so he opted to simply reach out and grasp for Hannibal’s hand, hoping he’d take pity. Once Hannibal’s fingers finally wrapped around his cock, Will tossed his head back and made a sound entirely too loud for his own liking.

“I spoil you,” Hannibal sat up and sucked his other nipple into his mouth, teasing it to stiffness with his tongue while stroking him. Will squirmed on his lap, having lost his pace entirely. “Anything for my darling.”

Will tried to speak, but his mouth was full of unintelligible sounds. Between the fullness inside him, the slick fist around his cock and Hannibal’s mouth and fingers on his chest, there was too much sensation, leaving him feeling raw and flayed open, hypersensitive, completely overwhelmed.

“Hannibal,” he almost slurred. “Close, I’m gonna—”

Hannibal’s teeth bit into his chest. Will seized up and felt his orgasm like a full-body shudder, throat clicking with choked moaning as it coursed through him. Hannibal dragged him down on top of him and thrusted up into the soft slick between his legs with desperate urgency, grabbing Will’s hair and angling his face toward his own to crush their lips together. In the dazed state he was in, Will could do little other than open his mouth, letting Hannibal’s tongue drag over his in uncoordinated strokes until Hannibal buried himself to the hilt inside him and came, groaning into his mouth.

Will gasped for breath like he was coming up for air from the bottom of a lake. As the daze wore off, everything felt like it was slowing down, their private little world once more becoming quiet and still.

“Wow,” Will said, laughing a little. “That was pretty amazing.”

Hannibal made a content sound of agreement and nuzzled his hair. “You look a mess.”

“Whose fault is that?”

“I take full credit, of course.”

“Of course.”

Will smiled and rolled off him, draping an arm over Hannibal's stomach. In the smoothness of his skin, he felt an irregular rise that gave him pause, on his side, just below his ribs. Lifting his gaze, he realized his fingers had found the outline of a scar. When he looked a little more closely, he was surprised to find that the expanse of Hannibal's tanned skin was marked by several faded lines in differing shapes and sizes, trailing from his sides and possibly all the way to his back.

"I never noticed these before," Will said, following the white line of a particularly long scar with his finger. He wondered how he could have possibly missed something like that, but then it occurred to him that perhaps he hadn't seen Hannibal completely naked as often as he might've thought. "How did you get these?"

Hannibal was quiet for some time. Will was quickly starting to feel uneasy.

"I don't wish to lie to you," Hannibal said. "Telling you would spoil the mood, I think."

"I don't care," it was possible that Will was being selfish, because that kind of scarring was likely accompanied by a less than pleasant story, but it suddenly felt important – crucial – to know what had caused it. He had never known Hannibal to evade his questions before. "Come on. You can't think I care about that."

Hannibal gave him a long look. Will's unease was turning into guilt, but just as he was about to tell him to forget about it, Hannibal spoke up.

"I told you I was placed in an orphanage because my family passed away. Their deaths were not natural, and my survival came at a certain price."

"I'm sorry. You don't—I had no right to probe, I shouldn't have asked."

"There is no use postponing the conversation now," Hannibal gave him a thin smile. "You should know. It's just as well. Though I would rather we cleaned up first."

Hannibal's acquiescence somehow only served to make Will feel worse about himself. But once Hannibal had a chance to shower and get dressed, the tense lines around his mouth faded and he acted like nothing out of the ordinary had happened at all. But then, that was how he usually behaved.

*

"I come from a family of import," Hannibal explained as they were seated in his study. A fire had been lit and it made his skin glow orange, dark shadows gathering in the hollows of his face. "In times of need, my father made some poor business decisions. To settle a debt, our house was ransacked and he and my mother were murdered. My sister and I were sold into forced labor. Armament manufacturing. Most children there suffered malnutrition and disease," his lips pursed ever so slightly. "Corporal punishment, too, as you have seen for yourself."

Will's chest gave a painful clench. He wanted to look away, but Hannibal sought his gaze with a frequency that made him think it was important to him to maintain eye-contact. Will

found he couldn't refuse him such a little thing, especially not now.

"I was ten at the time. My sister was four. We arrived during winter, and there was no heating. A toddler's body is much less resilient, as you can imagine."

Will could see it: trembling, bright red fingers grappling with sleek dark steel turned frigid by the cold. Imagining Hannibal as anything other than the poised man he was now was almost impossible, but he could imagine a child, could imagine a little wisp of a girl behind the protective shield of her big brother, and that alone made his stomach churn.

"The factory was shut down within a year of our arrival. I was taken to an orphanage along with the other children, but she, unfortunately, didn't make it."

"What was her name?"

Hannibal opened his mouth slightly and closed it again, as though her name was just about to spill past his lips and he felt the need to physically hold it back. His Adam's apple gave a small bob as he swallowed. "Mischa," he said after a moment's silence, voice almost unnaturally calm.

Will went through a number of clichéd phrases to express his condolences in his head, but ended up scrapping each and every one of them. "Did they catch the ones who did it?" he asked instead. "Killed your parents, I mean. Were the traffickers stopped?"

"No," the simple answer stirred complex feelings in Will. "I want you to know that this is not an issue I have yet to work through. I have seen a psychiatrist for many years, and I will tell you anything you wish to know. I only ask that you refrain from treating me any differently. I will not be pitied."

"I know," Will said, "I understand," and he truly did.

Hannibal seemed to be able to tell, because the slight tension he'd been holding in his face loosened its grip on his features. Will tried not to think about how some of those scars had appeared newer than others, jagged lines crossed over white ones in a fresh, almost raw shade of pink. There had been enough sharing for now, he thought.

*

There was attraction, and there was emotional attachment. Hannibal had assumed that the feelings of fascination and possessiveness Will had stirred in him from the day they met could be traced back to something fundamentally clinical. Fascination was little more than the thrill of encountering something rare in an unexpected place and possession seemed to him impersonal and detached, directed toward an object rather than a human being.

One did not take an object's opinion into consideration. One did not desire meaningful reciprocity from an object.

And yet, Hannibal found himself peeling back the layers of his person suit, inviting Will to his sacred spaces for no other reason than wanting access to the same places in Will. It was

increasingly difficult to be content with the affections Will offered to a faded half-truth of him, scattered pieces of a whole that would never add up to a full picture.

Subsequently, Hannibal had considered killing Will on several occasions.

Possession, fascination, the behavioral structure of intimacy – these were things familiar to him. Will could have his mouth or hand or the gripping tightness between his legs whenever he wished, and there could be dinners and conversations and the scrub of hips against hips at night when they slept wrapped around each other, but the idea that Hannibal not only wanted, but *needed* –

Dangerous, the way their eyes pulled like magnets as they were having a drink in his study. Will whisky, Hannibal red wine. Will looked as though the glass of wine belonged to him, lips still swollen and rosy from the lipstick. It did not come off from just wiping your mouth with a tissue, but Will couldn't be expected to know that, Hannibal supposed. The sight triggered an unrelated memory of Will watching him shave one morning, leaning against the doorframe with a look of fondness on his face. He recalled the high pitch of his laugh and the way he hid his face in the crook of his arm when Hannibal turned around and advanced slowly, razor poised, pretending he might shave off a patch of Will's beard.

(In truth, Hannibal's head had been swimming with images of sharp steel and glassy eyes and Will's neck, slick with blood and sliced into neat cross-sections. He would have shaved Will's beard beforehand and soothed the irritation from his skin with oils that smelled of sandalwood and musk and all things masculine, rendering his throat a cylinder of flesh and blood wrapped in scented, pristine skin, thin and soft to the touch like tissue paper in an expensive gift.)

The content of the memory differed from their current circumstances, of course, but the emotional impression attached to it was the same. Knowing the reasonable thing to do and consciously ignoring it. Because in retrospect, Hannibal found his memories lingered only on the tilt of Will's mouth when he smiled and wiped a spot of shaving cream from his cheek, the way he kissed him in passing – a mindless peck on the cheek, steeped in domesticity.

Hannibal considered at length the little intimacies he indulged in and that Will allowed. Imagining unconditional acceptance in those allowances was all too easy, and he had to remind himself that it was entirely possible that he was seeing things where there were none.

"I would help you find them, you know."

Will's voice reached him gradually through the static of buzzing thoughts, like turning up the volume on a radio. Hannibal blinked once, gaze flicking to Will.

"Pardon?"

Something in Will's face softened. His eyes were round and large and flooded with black, gentle like those of a cow or any such dumb creature. Hannibal was unsurprised to find that he was bothered by it.

"You were lost in thought," Will gave a little smile. "That seems unusual for you."

“Patterns of behavior aren’t necessarily consistent. They change with their environments.”

“With me?”

“I’m in my own house, following my usual routine. There is no other change to my environment, is there?”

“Some would say patterns of behavior are a major aspect of personality,” Will tilted his head. “Are you suggesting I’m changing your personality?”

The moment stretched on between them and refused to snap.

“You said you would help me find them,” Hannibal let his diversion speak for itself. “What were you referring to?”

Will’s eyes finally regained their edge, bone-hard and glinting, still almost entirely black in the warm light.

“I meant the people who killed your family. I’d help you find them, if you wanted me to.”

Hannibal thought about the sky. Looking up and seeing figures in the clouds, his brain creating patterns out of familiar, disconnected shapes.

“To what end?” he asked. “Even if I were interested in making it a legal issue, I doubt the authorities could proceed with my recollection of events.”

“I didn’t say I would drag them to court. I said I would help you find them.”

Whatever Hannibal answered, it would be crucial. Looking back, he would like to think he didn’t hesitate for a second.

“I already found them.”

Hannibal could practically read Will’s thought process on his face, the quick succession of logical reasoning that finally culminated in a shift of understanding in his eyes. At almost the exact same time, both Hannibal and Will gave the corkscrew on the table next to Hannibal’s chair a fleeting glance. Neither of them moved.

“How many were they?”

“Four.”

Will’s shoulders dropped, weighed down by disappointment or dejection or something else that Hannibal couldn’t discern. The trepidation showing on his face reminded Hannibal of a wild animal grappling with captivity.

“When did you—“

“I disposed of three of them in my youth. Locating the fourth one took considerably more time and effort, as he was hidden behind multiple aliases. This year will be the fifth

anniversary of his death."

"Where are the bodies?" Will held his hand up, as if he realized he didn't want to know the answer. "I mean—did you hide them well? Are you safe?"

"They will never be found. The question, I think, is whether I am safe from you now."

Will was utterly still and quiet for a few seconds. Then he sighed, and rubbed his face with his hand; that exasperated motion he would sometimes do, as if he could literally wipe his inner turmoil off the slate of his mind.

"Are you doing this on purpose? Always giving me enough clues to figure stuff out that could've easily remained secret? I don't know what to make out of what I know about you."

"Am I safe, Will?"

"If I say no, I'm not sure I'll be."

"If you say yes and I can tell that you are lying, you won't be safe either. By that logic."

"So honesty remains."

Will got out of his armchair and took the corkscrew off the table, holding onto it a beat longer than necessary before kneeling on the floor in front of Hannibal. He gave it to him with steady hands.

"You just thought about killing me," Will said. "For knowing this. That's also you showing me more than you have to."

Hannibal felt the cool weight of the corkscrew in his hand and curled his hand tight around it. "You thought about killing me too."

"I thought about defending myself."

"Because you assumed you would elicit an aggressive response in me," Hannibal's mouth twisted ever so slightly. "Am I safe, Will? I need you to tell me."

Hannibal felt an unpleasant sort of skittering across the span of his chest that he at first had trouble placing. He would later realize that even though he had been the one holding the weapon, he felt cornered. It was a frantic sensation, not foreign to him, but long since forgotten.

Will's gaze darted over his face, as if he were looking for an answer hidden in Hannibal's features. "Tell me everything that happened. Start to finish."

"You are hoping that the full story will justify my actions, so your continued loyalty may also be justified. I will not trust my safety to depend on the fickle nature of sympathy, Will."

Will regarded him quietly, then sighed. "You're right," he said. Then he surprised Hannibal by putting his head on his lap. "I said I'd be honest, but I don't know how. I don't know what

I'm supposed to do. Four are so many. So many opportunities to reconsider."

"One opportunity to reconsider. After the first one, there was no turning back," Hannibal gently brushed his hand through Will's hair, a light touch to bring some measure of comfort to them both. "Tell me what you are thinking."

"I'm thinking there's something wrong with me. Feels like – there's always something. As if I'm not supposed to have good things."

"Good things are a matter of subjective opinion. You offered to help me find those who killed my family. What kind of a proposition was that? What assistance was on the table if you were uninterested in the pursuit of legal justice?"

Will didn't answer. He didn't really have to. Hannibal knew, and Will knew that he knew.

"I think I'm safe," Hannibal said, voice softer now, though he still hadn't let go of the corkscrew.

"I honestly don't know," Will released a deep breath. It felt warm against his thigh. "I don't know how you could let me leave now. I don't think I'd let me leave."

There was a question in there, Will's voice curving at the end as if to ask whether it was a possibility. Hannibal was surprised to find that he hadn't even considered the option until then. In the end, he didn't have to deliberate it at length.

"I have taken a leap of faith with you many times," he said. "Coercion is not something I have ever had in mind for us. Keeping you here against your will would give neither of us what we want."

"What do you want?"

"Your informed consent."

Will huffed through his nose. "We're not in your office. You're not writing a paper about me."

"I still want the terms to be clear to you, so you are aware of what you are potentially choosing."

Part of him was tempted to ask what Will wanted, but he found he was reluctant to know. His thoughts wandered to the paper doll girls and their gruesome parody of youthful innocence, preserved for eternity. He wondered if that meaningless set of cultural symbols appealed to Will, to some shut-away, underfed machismo that secretly desired weak, empty and easy. The prey-like Lolitas, the narrow-hipped girlhood that Hannibal couldn't hope to achieve and never once possessed, only attempted to imitate with an effort that seemed pathetic in light of the authenticity he suddenly desired to attain.

(Hannibal was rarely disturbed by his own inclinations, but found that he was thinking, for the briefest of seconds: I would be weak, empty and easy for this man. I would be elastic youth and flower petals, everything in my wardrobe would be adorned with pink bows if he

desired it and I would bleed spots of red over the worn white of his sheets. His hands would iron the wrinkles out of my skin and in return –

For all the time they spent together, Hannibal was still not entirely certain he knew what he wanted from Will. Fitting their connection in this particular framework had been a temporary gambit that now didn't seem at all temporary.)

In his lap, Will pinched his eyes shut.

"I don't feel good. I think I'll go home. Can I call you if I need to?"

"Of course, Will."

"You can call me too. I just want to be alone for a little while. That's reasonable."

Will said it as if he were trying to convince himself rather than him, but Hannibal still nodded. "Perfectly reasonable," he confirmed.

When Will didn't make any attempt to lift his head off his lap, Hannibal touched his face and shifted slightly to goad movement into his body. The look on Will's face when he left was indiscernible, filled with nameless turmoil. Hannibal wished that he had something to keep them connected, Will's house key or his hand in marriage, to keep him moored, to keep Will within his grasp. He wished there was a way to kill him without losing him.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will woke up with a start, as though awareness literally crashed back into his skull. He drew a sharp breath and sat up, feeling achingly alive – head pounding to the rhythm of his beating heart, cock throbbing as though it had a pulse of its own.

Will had always had nightmares, but they seemed to be getting worse lately, extending into reality and blurring the boundaries between conscious and unconscious. The dark corners of the room seemed as though they were advancing, reaching out to him where he was filling the silence with labored breathing.

He turned on the lights, perhaps a little bit too quickly, and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. Then he grabbed the aspirin on his bedside table, hoping to alleviate the searing pain in his skull. Having swallowed a pill dry, he rested his head in his sweaty palm, trying to release the tension in his shoulders. Then he adjusted his erection, pressed awkwardly against a seam in his underwear.

Aside from the nightmares and the headaches, he was also starting to wake up to more of those.

Will pressed the heel of his palm to his painfully hard cock to take the edge off, feeling the wetness that had gathered where the tip pushed against the thin fabric. He let his fingers brush absently against the spot of wetness, then he rubbed his thumb over the clothed head of his cock with more intent. Arousal tingled along his spine. He closed his eyes and ignored the needle-prick of guilt as he replayed the nightmare in his head, feeling his arousal build with the rush of fear-fueled adrenaline.

He was just slipping his hand beneath the waistband of his underwear when reality caught up with him.

Red fingers in the snow, around a knife, in the splayed carcass of a human body. Red lips, red blood, a blur of timelines.

Will tore his hand away as though he'd been burnt, suddenly remembering what Hannibal had told him that evening, no more than a few hours ago. He waited for a slew of panic to wreath around him, but it never came. Not at the full-blown gut-punch sense he expected, anyway. It was a slow, creeping sense of dread that settled into his consciousness, the inverted waking up from a nightmare.

Ironically, Will's initial instinct was to contact Hannibal. To reach out to him for a comforting text or a five-minute phone call or any of the small reassurances he usually offered when Will couldn't sleep. It probably said something about the state of his mental health as well as his attachment to Hannibal, but he was so used to Hannibal being his sanctuary that his emotions hadn't caught up with what he now knew.

Checking his phone, Will found no new messages, nor any calls. He tapped on the screen until he found Hannibal's number and then called before he had a chance to talk himself out of it.

"Will?"

Hannibal's voice was rough and sweet as it wrapped around his name, like sugar crushed in a grind. Will imagined him rubbing his eyes the way he usually did in the mornings, his back bowing into a lazy curve as he stretched.

"Hey," Will had to swallow around a sudden tightness in his throat. "Did I wake you?"

"It's 4 in the morning. Did you know?"

"No. Sorry. I just wanted to hear your voice."

"Don't apologize. I'm glad you called." There was a rustle of static on the other line. "Have you slept?"

"A little bit. Can you come over? Before work, after work, whenever."

Hannibal paused. "I am already on my way to the car. I started getting dressed when I saw your name on my receiver."

Will smiled. The nightmarish hue began fading from the edges of his vision. "Presumptuous," he said.

"Hopeful."

"I'll make us breakfast then. See you soon."

Will hung up and went about his usual routine in the morning, although it was too early. Showering, putting on sweatpants and a fresh t-shirt, letting the dogs out. His smooth-faced reflection in the mirror still felt foreign, but he was getting used to it. He was getting used to a lot of things.

When Hannibal knocked – politely waiting for Will to open, as though he wasn't expecting him – Will was making coffee and pancake batter. He opened the door and let Hannibal inside along with a gust of cold air and a flurry of dogs. Hannibal was wearing his coat buttoned up over his yesterday's suit pants, wrinkled and hastily put on. Will thought he spied the sky blue nightgown he usually wore to bed under the collar of his coat, lacy trimmings contrasting with his bared collarbones.

It made for an odd combination, and Will couldn't help but smile a little. It was improbable that someone had seen him, but he still wouldn't have thought that Hannibal would actually go outside like that.

"You're early," he said, unable to keep the fondness out of his voice. "Must've been speeding. Be careful on the road."

“I always am,” Hannibal took his coat and shoes off. He wasn’t even wearing socks. When he started unbuttoning his pants, Will pointed to his closet.

“You can’t just wear that flimsy thing in here, it’s too cold. Borrow something from me.”

Hannibal nodded and started sorting through his closet while Will went back to the kitchen to fry pancakes. He made thin, crêpe-like ones, remembering that Hannibal had mentioned that he preferred those over American pancakes. He’d googled the recipe, and though the batter had been easy enough to make, he failed twice before he got the hang of turning the pancakes in the pan.

When Hannibal entered the kitchen, he was wearing the powder blue nightgown along with a thick terrycloth robe Will never used and a pair of patched up wool socks that he did use. His heart swelled at the mere sight, mismatched and odd and entirely endearing as it was.

“I made pancakes,” Will said. “I like how you look in my things.”

“Your things alone, or my things alongside yours?”

“Your things alongside mine. Worlds colliding.”

“Or coming together.”

Will couldn’t help but pick up on the hope in Hannibal’s voice, carefully concealed behind a veneer of indifference. He averted his gaze and gestured for Hannibal to sit. The somewhat absurd thought of pulling out the chair for him entered Will’s mind, as if they were in a formal setting and Hannibal was truly a woman.

If their roles were swapped, Will was sure that Hannibal would’ve done it for him. Hannibal never seemed to let hard facts intrude upon the reality he constructed for himself.

“I know your cooking is better,” Will said as he served Hannibal his plate. “This will have to do.”

Will had spread a thin layer of lemon curd over the pancakes before rolling them up with a blueberry compote. The curd had been brought to him by Hannibal a few days ago and the blueberries were from his freezer, quickly stirred together with sugar and water on the stove. They leaked a deep reddish purple when Hannibal cut into his serving.

“You are a better cook than you give yourself credit for,” Hannibal said after his first bite, a hint of approval in his voice. “The consistency can be difficult to get right.”

“I thought about dusting them with powdered sugar,” Will said. “I don’t know why I didn’t.”

“You would view it as an incongruent element to your dish. The image you construct of yourself is a no-frills kind of person, in the kitchen and outside of it.”

“I like to keep it simple.”

“Precisely.”

“It’s just some powdered sugar though. It would’ve looked nice.” Will smiled a little. “You would have used powdered sugar. No doubt.”

“I was never opposed to frills.” Hannibal gave a small smile in return, dropping his gaze to his plate. He ate like he was kissing, all wet little noises and lips sticking together, eyes closed, sweeping his lashes across the soft skin beneath his eyes. “You asked permission to contact me if, for any reason, you needed to. Am I to assume that’s why you decided to call me?”

“I don’t know.” Will shoved a piece of pancake around on the plate with his fork. “I had a nightmare. I’m so used to texting you when that happens, but it didn’t feel like it’d be enough this time.”

“It was a particularly disturbing nightmare?”

“No, just—” Will’s brows knitted together. “More vivid than usual.”

“Perhaps you would benefit from telling me.” Hannibal glanced up at him. “I know you prefer not to share your nightmares with me, but it might be useful. At the very least, it may serve to give you some peace of mind.”

Will kept his gaze down. “I dreamed you were a paper doll, and I was dressing you. Painting your face. Underneath my magnifying glass over there,” he nodded to his desk, cluttered up with half-finished fishing lures and tools. “I started out simple. But then I just kept adding to it. More lace, more frills, drawing your lips bigger and redder.” He drew a deep breath. “In the end, it didn’t even look like you.”

“It’s your sense of self blurring with the killer, causing you to worry about crossing my boundaries,” Hannibal said. “I offer you a finger, you take the whole hand.”

Will shook his head. “I don’t think it’s just that. It’s my expectations. You were perfect. Too perfect. It’s my fault for building you up like that in my own head. I would’ve been disappointed one way or another.”

Hannibal looked a little hurt. Which, Will thought, he didn’t really have a right to be. He put his knife and fork down on his empty plate. “What is the extent of your disappointment?”

“I don’t know.” Will rubbed absently at his temples. His headache refused to budge. “Were you really prepared to kill me? Would you have been able to?”

“I once told you the drive for self-preservation is very strong.”

“Then you said you might let me destroy you.”

Hannibal gave him a long look. “I can see myself letting you do so, given enough time and attachment.”

“So killing me would be nipping it in the bud?” Will huffed a humorless laugh. “You must know what this makes you sound like.”

“Tell me what it makes me sound like.”

“I profile the criminally insane for a living. To me, it sounds familiar. From professional experience.”

“Perhaps you should try to profile me.” Hannibal sat up a little straighter. “Then we might know the extent of your disappointment.”

Will leaned back in his seat and regarded Hannibal quietly. “How did you kill those people?”

“I would advise you to refrain from asking if you don’t truly wish to know, Will.”

“I do want to know. I’m profiling you.”

“I used a knife to kill all of them,” Hannibal’s gaze was cool, appearing deliberately blank to Will. “Their deaths were slow.”

“You wanted to extend their suffering,” Will surmised. “It was intimate. Your weapon functioning as an extension of yourself. Did you take something from them? Trophies?”

“In a manner of speaking. I took a liver, a kidney, a tongue and a cheek.”

Will’s stomach lurched. He ignored it. “You would know how to. You were a surgeon.” He frowned. “Is that why you became a surgeon? This vengeance mission of yours?”

“I killed the first one before I entered medical school. Although my career choice seemed appropriate for many reasons.”

Will tried to assemble what Hannibal told him into a cohesive narrative, but something was missing. “Those are specific body parts,” he thought aloud. “I would assume that you’d be particular about your choice in trophies, but I don’t see how a cheek would hold any value, symbolic or otherwise. And why a liver? A kidney? Doesn’t make sense to me.”

“I picked my trophies, if you insist on calling them that, for practical concerns.”

There was an edge of wariness to Hannibal’s voice now, one that combined with his words struck Will with a horrible idea. He was quiet for a beat too long, mouth hanging slightly open as he thought of how to ask.

Hannibal had said the children suffered malnutrition.

“How did Mischa die, Hannibal?”

Hannibal didn’t speak for a long moment. They stared at each other from across the table. There was a smudge of lemon curd at the corner of Hannibal’s mouth and the blueberries had stained his lips lavender. Will blinked, once, twice, seeing his lips covered in residual lipstick, then tacky specks of dry blood. He closed his eyes altogether after that.

“It was a very cold winter.” Hannibal’s voice reached him through the dark. “The workplace was set up in the middle of nowhere, not made to last. The truck supplying food provisions

didn't arrive. Our food stocks were low to begin with."

"You ate them," Will said, voice barely audible. "They ate her. So you ate them."

Will opened his eyes. Hannibal's throat worked. He was too still, face like that of a statue, the tendons on his neck protruding. "Am I still safe, Will?"

Will's head was filled with flashing images of hands unmarred by time and experience, struggling to cut through skin and flesh and muscle to bare soft, slick organs, caged by broken bones. He thought of the look on Hannibal's face on a man much younger; not yet a surgeon, not yet a psychiatrist, not yet a murderer. He thought of Hannibal no more than five years ago, contemplating the completion of his revenge.

The pain in Will's head grew so sharp it sent a burst of white light in front of his eyes, and he jerked back in his chair.

"Will," Hannibal was immediately up on his feet, kneeling next to him by the chair. "What's wrong?"

"My head," Will heard his own voice from a distance, muted, swaddled in shrieking static. "It's—it's been pretty bad lately."

Hannibal touched his forehead. His gaze was attentive and inquiring, as though he wasn't certain he had permission to touch. Will leaned into it, even after everything. The pulsating pain persisted, but the white edges faded slowly from his vision, the buzz dying down in his ears.

"You feel quite hot," Hannibal said. "How long have you had these headaches?"

"A while. Not sure."

"Why haven't you told me?"

"It's not more than I can handle."

Hannibal gave him a vaguely disapproving look, but abstained from remarking on it. "Wait here," he said, then he went to get Will a glass of water and an aspirin. Placing a gentle hand on his lower back, he led Will to his bed, offering him the glass of water to wash down the pill. Will didn't particularly feel like laying down again, but he did feel a little better once his head hit the pillow.

Hannibal went to the bathroom and returned with a towel soaked in cold water, sitting down at the edge of the bed to hold it to Will's forehead. Will sighed at the cooling sensation, suddenly aware of the way his temples were damp with sweat. He hadn't noticed until then. Hannibal's thumb swiped over his cheek, leaving a smear of wetness behind. Will hadn't noticed he was crying until then either.

"If you want me to leave, I will," Hannibal said.

Will shook his head. His nose was starting to feel stuffy and his vision was blurred. “Stay. Come here,” he managed. Then he scooted closer to the wall and pulled the blankets aside for Hannibal, who put the towel away and climbed in beside him. Hannibal kept some distance between them, so Will pulled him closer, stuffing his runny nose in the soft patch of skin on Hannibal’s neck. If Hannibal minded, he didn’t say.

“I don’t know what to do,” Will admitted.

“Do you want to finish your profile?”

“Not really.” Will released a deep breath. He truly didn't want to, but he had no choice but to continue. Or so it felt. “You’re methodical. Calculating and meticulous. Pathologically, most likely. I don’t really subscribe to the idea of psychopathy as a legitimate classification where mental health issues are concerned, but you likely have psychopathic traits.” He closed his eyes. “You’ve killed many times over. You thought about killing me yesterday. Maybe you still do. You probably could.”

“Assuming I want to.”

“Assuming you want to.”

Will’s tears were drying on his face, but his headache persisted and he just felt so *tired*. Hannibal turned in his arms and stroked his hair with one large hand, then brought it lower to knead his neck, working his way up the dome of his skull. It didn’t really alleviate the pain, but it still felt good, his heavy head held between Hannibal’s strong hands a metaphor as good as any.

“My psychiatrist is bound by doctor-patient confidentiality, of course,” Hannibal said. “But I can request my mental health records if you want to see them.”

“Would there be anything for me to see?”

“I am diagnosed with C-PTSD.”

Will’s heart gave a squeeze. His hand clenched where it rested on Hannibal’s hip. “I trust you. You don’t have to show me anything. This is just such an impossible situation. I don’t know how we could move past it. If we even should.”

“I thought you would be far more distressed. I thought you might call the police when you left last night. At the very least, I thought you would contact Jack.”

“Did you really think so?”

Hannibal paused. “Admittedly, I was thinking of how people in general were likely to react.”

“You shouldn’t think of me like that. I’m not them,” Will worried the lacy hem of Hannibal’s nightgown between his fingers. “Do you know why I like it when you’re dressed like this? You let yourself go places you wouldn’t otherwise go. I realized that’s what it was when I tried it for myself yesterday.”

“What places are those?”

Will looked at Hannibal’s mouth for a long time. Then he leaned in to kiss him. He tasted sugary and tart and made a small gasping sound as Will grasped the base of his skull and angled his mouth to deepen their kiss. When he pulled back, Hannibal’s eyes were wide open, pale lashes catching the rising sun pouring in through the window.

“Places where you tell me you’d let me destroy you,” Will said, “and I believe you.”

Hannibal moaned a little as Will slipped his hand under the waistband of his panties, a hesitant and almost inquisitive sound.

“Remember how you said you wanted to be a good girl for me?” Will said, voice a little unsteady. “Maybe you’d like to show me how good you can be right now.”

Hannibal looked at him for a moment, face unreadable. Then he gave a small nod. Will removed his hand from his underwear. “Pull those down.”

While Hannibal slid his panties down to his knees, Will spit in his hand and curled it around Hannibal’s cock, smearing the slickness over the length of it. He squeezed until his hand created a tight ring and leaned in to speak close to Hannibal’s face.

“Make yourself come.”

Hannibal released a small breath and braced himself with one hand clutching the bedframe and the other fisted in the sheets. Then he started moving, thrusting into Will’s hand. Will watched, mesmerized by the twitching in his face, the thinning of his lips, the little moans his clenched jaws muted.

On a whim, Will pulled up the gown and all but shoved the bunched up silk in Hannibal’s mouth, making him bite down on it. The tense muscles of Hannibal's stomach were exposed along with his chest and Will reached out to touch him there, circling the pad of his thumb over one of his nipples. The way Hannibal grunted around the fabric in his mouth made Will aware of his own erection, tenting his sweatpants.

“Look at you,” he said. “So eager, just to come in my hand. You thought you might kill me. This isn’t someone who could pose a threat to me. Is it?”

Hannibal grunted and Will squeezed his hand tighter. His spit was drying a little and he thought it all must be verging on uncomfortable for Hannibal, but he could see no sign of it on his face. “Is it?” he repeated, and Hannibal shook his head, jaw visibly tensing.

“That’s sorted, then,” Will pried Hannibal’s hand off the sheet and placed it firmly over his erection, grunting a little as the touch relieved some of the pressure. “You feel that? That’s how good you are. Now you’re going to be my best girl and come for me, right?”

Hannibal made a breathy sound, half-sigh, half-gasp. Then his thrusts became irregular and he spilled over Will’s hand with a small moan. His eyes were dark and dim as Will took the

damp nightgown out of his mouth and used it to clean his hand and mop up the come on Hannibal's stomach.

"Sorry about that," Will said, casting a look to the soiled fabric. "I'll throw it in the wash later."

"It's quite alright, Will," Hannibal's eyes darted up to look at him. "Did I give you what you wanted?"

"You know you did."

Hannibal's lips pulled into a weak smile. "You wanted the illusion of harmlessness. For me to make myself vulnerable. I told you that I have taken many leaps of faith with you. Around you, I am never not vulnerable."

Hannibal's voice was soft in a way Will disliked; like fruit too ripe to be eaten. "Maybe the illusion of harmlessness just makes it obvious to me," he said, feeling some dormant resentment surface. "Don't try to downplay your agency. These last 24 hours have made it apparent to me that I have been vulnerable around you in ways I couldn't even have guessed."

"Reciprocity. Equal terms. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"I'm not sure that's what this is," Will exhaled. "It doesn't surprise me that there are unsavory parts to you. There are unsavory parts to me too. Of course, you already knew that."

"They aren't unsavory to me." Hannibal gave him such a sincerely fond look that Will's heart skipped a beat. Holding onto his resentment was so horrifyingly difficult. Hannibal turned so many things on end for him.

"Do you want my help with that?" Hannibal's hand brushed over Will's erection. He spread his legs a little wider. "You can finish inside me."

Will shook his head. "No. I'm tired. Takes too much time to get you ready."

"Preparations aren't necessary. Just use lubrication."

Will touched his face. "Don't say that. I don't want to hurt you."

"I only ask that you take what you need from me," Hannibal's voice gave nothing away, but there was a depth to his eyes that Will thought must have been unavailable to him until then; something like hunger or anxiety or desperation, hollow and gaping. "Please."

Will lowered his gaze. "On your stomach."

Hannibal did as he was told and Will grabbed the lube, making himself slick. Then he poured some more over his hand and smeared it between Hannibal's thighs. He shifted Hannibal to his side and spooned up behind him, sliding his cock between his thighs – warm and soft and wet like the inside of his mouth, not as tight as his hole, but still perfect, still so impossibly *good*.

“Will,” Hannibal murmured, a note of disapproval in his voice.

“Come on, don’t be ridiculous,” Will grunted softly as he started moving. “You’d be so sore. You’d tear.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Why do you want it?” Hannibal was quiet for a beat too long and Will tightened his grip on him. “Don’t think about it, just tell me.”

“It would play into the illusion of harmlessness. Submission and self-sacrifice.”

“You want me to believe that part of you isn’t an illusion.”

“I may not be one of your paper doll girls,” Hannibal’s breath hitched and Will caught the thread of bitterness running through his words, pulling them tight. “But I have never given as much of myself to anyone before. That is entirely true.”

“I believe you,” Will picked up the pace of his thrusts. “They aren’t mine. I don’t want them. I want you, as you are.”

Hannibal buried his face in the pillow, stifling an airy moan. Will didn’t want him to hide. He reached for Hannibal’s face and gripped his jaw with his hand, holding him in place.

“You’re so good,” Will mumbled against his neck, words almost getting lost in his labored breathing. “Squeeze your legs together a little more. That’s it. Perfect.”

He let one of his fingers slip into Hannibal’s half-open mouth and moaned as those soft lips closed around it, sucking and licking with an eagerness Will recognized from Hannibal’s mouth on his dick. He added a second finger and moved them back and forth in time with his thrusting, feeling like his fingers were somehow directly connected to his cock, adding to the pleasure roiling low in his gut.

When Will felt Hannibal’s teeth press down on his fingers, driven all the way to the knuckles into his mouth, he finally felt himself tumble over the edge. He came shuddering, coating the inside of Hannibal’s thighs with warm-slick spurts of come.

Letting his fingers slip from Hannibal’s mouth, Will rubbed his thumb against the plush, wet softness of Hannibal’s lips, resting his forehead against the back of his head.

“Hey,” he murmured into Hannibal’s neck. “You ok?”

Hannibal made a humming sound and turned until they were facing each other. His face looked open and worn; not so much like he was tired, but like putting up a front was too much work. Will couldn’t read his face any better than usual anyway.

“Yes, Will. Of course.”

“Of course.” Will smiled a little and pushed Hannibal’s messy hair away from his face. “I was thinking. Could we sign that workplace romance form Jack was pestering you about?”

Hannibal blinked. “At least some part of our arrangement will be sensible then, I think,” Will added. “I’d like for us to do something… normal.”

“If that is what you want,” Hannibal said.

“It is,” Will confirmed. Then he glanced at his alarm clock. “I have to shower. Got a class today. You?”

“I have appointments after lunch.” Hannibal drew a deep breath. “If it would not violate my own cancellation policy, I would reschedule. My day could be spent here, cleaning up and preparing dinner for the two of us. A proper meal would be waiting for you once you were on your way home.”

Another smiled pulled at the corner of Will’s mouth. “Very domestic.”

“You did just say you desired normalcy.”

Will was just thinking how decidedly *not* normal their relationship was when his phone buzzed where it lay on the table beside his bed. He reached over Hannibal and answered it without looking at the caller ID.

“Hello?”

Jack’s voice sounded on the other line, grim and tight. “We just found another body. I’m texting you the address, you need to come take a look.”

“Another one? Is it a paper doll kill?”

“Looks like it. It’s not- it isn't exactly the same though,” Jack paused. “Is Hannibal with you?”

Will glanced down and pulled his arm tighter around Hannibal’s middle, feeling oddly protective and defensive at the same time. “Yeah, why?”

“Take him with you. We could use a second opinion on this.”

Jack hung up and Will put his phone down. “Jack wants you to come too.”

Hannibal eyed him for a moment. “I don’t have a change of clothes with me.”

Will very nearly smiled at the idea of dragging Hannibal out to a crime scene in a spit and semen soaked nightgown, but the thought quickly turned sour with another flare of that protective and defensive amalgam of emotion.

“You have your suit pants at least,” he said. “Borrow a shirt from me.”

There was a vague look of discontent on Hannibal’s face. Will narrowed his eyes, then he couldn’t help the fond huff of a laugh that escaped him. “Don’t be an ass. Wear a scarf over it if you hate my shirts that much.”

“I don’t dislike them on you,” Hannibal said, a pleased smile threatening to spill over his lips. “We had better get ready then.”

*

They arrived at the crime scene as the sun climbed up over the rooftops, dousing the world in gold and pink. They were in a suburban area, littered with rows of box-shaped houses. Jack greeted them outside the house closed off with yellow tape.

“Her name is Louise Madison. She was a mother of two,” he said. “This is her parents’ home. They’re away on vacation. She was found in her old room, like the others.”

“I’ll take a look,” Will looked over at Hannibal as Jack walked away. “You don’t have to come inside, you know. I don’t care what Jack has to say about it.”

There was something like amusement on Hannibal’s face, a flicker of humor in his eyes that was gone before Will could call him out on it. “I was a surgeon, Will. A crime scene is different from an OR, I'll concede, but I am well familiar with the visual of a deconstructed body.”

“Not like this, you aren’t,” Will mumbled. Then he froze a little as he remembered what Hannibal had told him that morning. “Your job is to keep me anchored,” he pointed out, though it was all just token protests by now. “From a safe distance. You aren’t supposed to jump in with me.”

“As it is my job, I will act according to my professional judgement,” Hannibal said, walking ahead of Will into the house. Will followed, catching up with him in two quick steps.

The room they found the victim in bore no trace of childhood, likely having been remodeled into a guest room. The woman had been dressed up in red underwear, positioned suggestively in the center of the room, a collection of frilled, lacy lingerie strewn around her.

The difference compared to the other paper doll kills was that she had been beheaded.

Louise Madison’s heavily made up face was on the floor next to the body, blank eyes gazing up at the ceiling through clumped mascara that had run down her cheeks in watery streaks.

“Christ,” Will mumbled. “Alright, I just need a moment alone in here. Can you wait outside? Just five minutes or so.”

Hannibal gave a curt nod and exited the room, not without casting a quick glance at Will over his shoulder. Will listened for the sound of the door clicking shut, then he closed his eyes and let the pendulum drop in front of his mind’s eye. It swept away yellow tape and white chalk and placed him on his knees with the head of Louise Madison held between his gloved hands, eye to eye, his touch almost like that of a lover.

He tried desperately to find something other than a challenge in her face, sticky with mascara and fear, but everything read to him as a conscious rebellion – from the defiant glint in her

eyes to the children she had out of wedlock. His rage was a boil brought down to a simmer, even like a flatlining heartbeat.

He rubbed his thumb over the woman's lips to smear the lipstick, and something immediately felt out of place. The motion was familiar, but the image of her face wasn't. As this realization hit him, he felt the touch to his own lips, feeling a jolt of panic as he realized his gaze was turned to the vast blankness of the ceiling.

A deep, ragged inhale brought Will back to himself. He blinked in rapid succession, finding himself on his knees with his head tipped back to face the ceiling. It offered no new insights. He closed his eyes again and tried to steady his breathing, then he got up on slightly shaky legs, walking out of the room to find Hannibal waiting for him on the other side of the door.

"Will. It sounded like you were experiencing some emotional distress, but I was afraid I might startle you. Are you—"

"This is a punishment," Will interrupted, reluctant to acknowledge the concern in Hannibal's tone. "It's mockery and debasement. But I have no idea why he cut off her head, if I'm honest."

Hannibal glanced into the room. "Perhaps it is meant to introduce another element of storytelling."

"What kind of story would that be?"

Hannibal pondered for a moment. "One Thousand and One Nights. When the sultan found out that his first wife was unfaithful to him, he resolved to marry a new virgin each day and behead the previous day's wife, to ensure their fidelity."

Will gave a thoughtful nod. "Our killer started out with an idealized view of women. Dressed them up in white, presented them with an air of modesty. Now his crime scenes are working their way towards becoming displays of debauchery. His Scheherazade betrayed him?"

"Not unlikely."

Will rubbed his mouth with his hand, then pressed it over his eyes. "I'll tell Jack to question previous suspects again. Look at their romantic involvements. Whether they have a history of cheating spouses."

They stepped back outside and Will gave Jack a summary of what he thought, getting a series of approving nods in return. Wrapping the conversation up, he stole a quick glance to where Hannibal was standing a few feet away, looking up at the house with that calculated nothingness on his face.

"Heard you wanted us to sign some kind of form," Will said to Jack, still looking at Hannibal. "Bring it by my office, I'll make sure Hannibal gets it too."

"You should get a referral." Will heard Jack's frown in his voice. "I didn't think Hannibal would stoop to this level of unprofessionalism. I didn't expect it from either of you."

“Yet you only brought it up with him.” Will flicked his gaze back to Jack. He couldn’t help the note of accusation in his tone. “I don’t want a referral. Hannibal knows me.”

“That’s the problem. You need an objective eye.”

“Maybe that’s the opposite of what I need.”

“Figure that out in therapy?” There was no real heat behind Jack’s words, but his brows were lowered over glum eyes. He sighed. “Look. You do whatever you want. I just think you should consider why people tend to separate these kinds of relationships. I’m thinking of what’s best for you.”

Will gritted his teeth. Jack’s condescending phrasing aside, he had to admit that he had a point. “I’ll sign the form. No referrals, not yet. Call me if you need something.”

Will walked off, stopping by his car. He leaned against it, heaving a sigh. The image of Louise Madison lingered at the back of his head and he thought about the shallow slate of her frozen face, turned towards the ceiling. He was vaguely aware of Hannibal coming to stand beside him, leaning against the car the way Will did.

“Is everything alright, Will?”

“Yeah,” Will said. “I just feel like there are always pieces I’m missing. I haven’t seen someone kill like this in a long time. With this—this kind of theatricality.”

“Surely that is not unusual in serial killers.”

“No, I guess not.” A moment’s silence. “Jack thought it might be the Chesapeake ripper when we found the first body.”

“The Chesapeake ripper is thought to be caught, isn’t he?”

Will shot him a sidelong look. “Tell me you heard that from Jack. If you read TattleCrime, that might actually be a deal breaker for me.”

Hannibal’s expression turned rueful. “I do, I’m afraid.”

“Unbelievable,” Will scoffed, but couldn’t help a small smile. “I’ll accept it as a guilty pleasure, as long as you keep in mind that 99 percent of what you’re reading is bullshit.”

“I will,” Hannibal’s eyes lit up with amusement. “What do you think of the Chesapeake ripper? As a professional with a keener insight.”

Will shrugged. “The kills stopped when Gideon was imprisoned, but the ripper might still be at large. Theatricality is the only thing he has in common with the paper doll killer though. The ripper doesn’t make a spectacle of his private life. His kills are tailored to the victim, largely detached from him.”

“You sound very certain.”

“I’ve taught classes on the guy since I started teaching at Quantico.” Will gestured to his car. “I have to go. You’d better hurry if you want to make it to your office before lunch. It’s a long drive.”

Hannibal nodded. Then hesitated for a moment. “Suppose I did want to cook for you tonight. At your house. Would you allow it?”

Will paused. He felt no confliction about what he wanted and realized, suddenly, that uncertainty had never been the problem where Hannibal was concerned. His problem was his lack of uncertainty and confliction – a guilt about a lack of guilt.

He glanced around at the bustling scenery, the flickering blue and red of sirens, the people scattered around the crime scene with that look on their faces that Will quietly resented.

“Come,” Will told Hannibal, opening the car door for him. He closed it and stepped around to get to the driver’s seat.

“You want to know why I offered to help you find the ones who killed your family?” Will asked, because he couldn’t help it. Because that part of him called out to that part of Hannibal, and it seemed pointless to deny it.

Hannibal’s gaze snapped into focus. “Tell me.”

“At first, I didn’t even articulate a reason. I just had this vague idea of wanting justice. Eye for an eye. I wanted to give that to you.”

“And then?”

Will closed his eyes and braced himself. “Then I realized it wasn’t just that. Hearing what happened to you—it made me so *angry*.” He swallowed. “When you told me how you killed them, it felt good to hear. I could imagine it – the blood, their pleading. Their silence. I would have liked it, I think. T-to do that, to them.”

“You would have liked to participate?” Hannibal sounded a touch breathless and his features had set in an eerie stillness; the clear sky of a windless day. Will felt like all the air had been sucked out of the car.

“I’m already participating, by keeping your secret.” Will’s heart was pounding. “But I think I would have liked to be the reason they died. The cause to their effect.”

Hannibal didn’t say anything, and Will thought he might have made a mistake voicing that particular string of confessions. But then a warm hand reached out to touch his face, cradling his cheek in his palm. Will turned his face and kissed it, and then Hannibal drew him in for a kiss on the mouth, all teeth and tongue and unrelenting pressure that had Will struggling to breathe through it.

“I’ll be working late tonight, I think,” Will said once Hannibal let up. He rested their foreheads together, feeling that familiar warmth in his chest that Hannibal so easily inspired.

“One of my neighbors has a spare key though. I’ll tell her to drop it on the porch, under my doormat. Let yourself in whenever you want.”

“And you will come home to me?”

Will looked at Hannibal’s face: his nose, his eyes, the feather stitch of creased skin around them. That mouth. He thought of the sounds it made, closed around silver forks and secrets and Will’s name. When he called Hannibal, when he let him past his doorstep, Will thought he would come to regret it. He didn’t. If anything, he felt relief. Lifelines snapped, only then proving themselves to be tethers.

“Yeah,” Will said, breath ghosting across Hannibal’s smiling lips. “I’ll come home to you.”

Chapter End Notes

Here's where this part of the story ends! Thanks for reading, I hope you enjoyed it. And an extra big thanks to those of you who bought me coffees, commented and left kudos on the first chapter, it really means so much to me <3

End Notes

Thanks for reading! More of my Hannigram stuff can be found on my tumblr

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!